

Panhandle Health District

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Web-based Call System Improves Public Safety

By Cynthia Taggart
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Rain is pouring in buckets and snowy fields are quickly transforming into lakes. The river is spilling over its banks, water covers roads and heavy winds are threatening to topple trees. Radio and television reporters are warning people to stay home, but your neighborhood is close to the overflowing river.

You gather your family and start to tell them the plan is to escape on the flooded highway to safer quarters, but the phone interrupts you. The phone's caller ID field says "Public Safety." It's an automated message from Kootenai County's Office of Emergency Management notifying you to evacuate immediately to Canyon School. It warns of danger on the flooded highway and recommends a safer route. It asks you to press 1 on your phone keyboard if you have no means of evacuation.

Seven hundred of your neighbors receive the same call within fifteen minutes. The Office of Emergency Management arranges transportation for the five households that pressed 1. Thanks to Mapstorm, the neighborhood is quickly and safely evacuated.

"It's a tool for fire responders, elected officials, emergency responders to notify the public as soon as possible," says Brad Coughenour, Kootenai County's 911 director. "We're hoping to eliminate a lot of 911 calls and keep the phone lines open."

Panhandle Health District (PHD) bought the Mapstorm Emergency Notification System in August for the five northern counties. It's a computerized program that uses 911 data to get messages to the majority of the population in its service area.

"Manual calling takes time and we saw this as a way we could contact the public quicker," says Doug Fredericks, Public Health Preparedness planner for PHD.

Before computerized call-out programs, radio, television and bullhorns broadcast notifications of emergencies. A person speaking through a bullhorn typically from a helicopter hopefully reached the people not listening to radio or TV. In some cases, emergency workers walked door to door to notify people.

Last year, PHD saw a demonstration of a computerized call-out program and wanted one for the district. Not only would the program contact the public by phone, cellphone, FAX, e-mail or pager, it also would notify emergency workers that their services were needed. Like e-mail, call-out programs contact by designated groups, for instance Kootenai County Sheriff's Department Marine Division.

Research led PHD to the Mapstorm Emergency Notification System. It can make nearly 2,900 30-second calls over 24 lines per hour. It places calls to designated groups or to everyone within a marked area on a map. It collects information on who responded to the call, who needs help, where it left a message and who it needs to call again because no one answered.

PHD used \$33,000 from a Centers for Disease Control pandemic flu grant to buy the system. The Coeur d'Alene Tribe helped with \$4,500 for telecommunication equipment. Kootenai County agreed to house the system in its 911 center and pay the \$8,000 a year maintenance costs until Shoshone, Benewah, Bonner and Boundary counties join the system and help with support.

Coughenour tested Mapstorm on the public for the first time the last week in November. He named the system "Public Safety," which shows on the phones with caller ID. Coughenour programmed

Mapstorm to call 3,340 households between Atlas Road and 15th Street south of Interstate 90 with notification that a short fireworks display was scheduled for 4 a.m. on Nov. 28.

“I was pleased with the results,” he says. “And we found things to tweak.”

Coughenour learned that the computer voice reads typed messages differently than he supposed. For instance, it reads a period at the end of a sentence as “Point.” It pronounced Kootenai as Koo-ta-nay.

The records it kept of the calls showed that 315 were answered. The system left 716 messages on answering machines and 1,309 calls failed, most likely meaning people hung up before the call was finished.

Now Coughenour’s mission is to teach people that when they see “Public Safety” on caller ID it means they’re receiving a phone call that’s vital to their health and safety. For cellphones that just show the number of the caller, Coughenour suggests people identify the Mapstorm number—664-4254—as Public Safety as a reminder to answer those calls.

In the next few weeks, Coughenour will help fire and law enforcement departments test the call-out systems on their staffs. Here’s how it will work: a fire chief with the password to Mapstorm will direct the system to notify his fire crew to assemble. The system will send out 24 calls at a time and notify the chief about which calls were answered.

After the start of the new year, Coughenour will work on a method by which the public can update its information for Mapstorm. People will be able to add their cellphone numbers and e-mail addresses to the program, notification sources that the 911 system may not have. Public notice will go out when he’s ready for the public input.

“We’re committed to this for three years,” Coughenour says. “This is a great tool.”